This unsigned Birmingham World article describes "A Realistic Approach to Progress in Race Relations," which King delivered to the Birmingham NAACP on 23 January.¹ In his speech King emphasized gaining the ballot as a step toward first-class citizenship, saying, "A voteless people is a powerless people." The article also reports his efforts to enlist all Dexter church members as "voters and members of the NAACP."

Blasting away at apathy among church leaders in the field of civil rights, the Rev. Martin L. King, Jr., pastor Dexter Avenue Baptist Church of Montgomery, condemned racial segregation as "a wrong" in a speech made at an NAACP rally Sunday afternoon at Tabernacle Baptist Church.

Meantime he took a frowning view of the opinions expressed by Dr. Collier P. Clay, 68-year-old president of Union Theological Seminary here, made at Notasulga, Ala., Saturday, Jan. 22 on a program sponsored by the Southern Negro Improvement Association of Alabama, Inc., headed by Samuel H. Moore of Birmingham. Clay in his speech approved segregation.²

The youthful minister asserted that "segregation is a form of slavery" and denounced those Negro individuals who imply that they believed in "mental slaves" which the speaker declared was one of the worst forms of slavery. He said that the group's true leadership must speak out against those who advocate and condone segregation, discrimination and humiliation.

He used the subject, "A Realistic Approach to Progress in Race Relations." The Rev. King said there were two extreme approaches, neither which merited adoption. One was the extremely optimistic view that much progress has been made, therefore we should sit down. The other was the extremely pessimistic view that very little had been done, hence we should sit down and do nothing.

He recommended a third or realistic approach which took the best of both of the extreme views. "We have come a long long way but we have a long, long way to go," he expressed it. He recited the achievement of the group and then outlined the goals. This he called the "realistic" approach.

¹. This version of the speech has not been located. For a later version, see "A Realistic Look at Race Relations," speech at the annual dinner of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 17 May 1956, MLKP-MBU, Box 5.
². Clay reportedly endorsed segregation and denounced the NAACP and its "troublemakers." The Alabama NAACP executive committee issued a statement repudiating Clay's speech. After an investigation into the matter, the Birmingham Baptist Ministers Conference voted to exclude Clay and C. J. Glaze, president of the Southern Association for Improvement of Race Relations, from its membership. See "Barrage of Criticism Levelled at Dr. Clay," Alabama Tribune, 4 February 1955; and Baptist Leader, 3 and 24 February 1955.
Among the ways the group can help itself toward the goals of first-class citizenship he said was by getting the ballot. “A voteless people is a powerless people.” A second method is to joining the NAACP and put some big money into the freedom fight. Thirdly, he recommended using the courts more to obtain unjustly denied rights. He called for an immediate start toward the implementation of the May 17 U.S. Supreme Court decision banning the segregated school system.

“You must do more than pray and read the Bible” to destroy segregation and second-class citizenship—“you must do something about it,” the speaker counselled. He related how at fashionable Dexter Avenue Baptist Church he had set up a social and political action committee whose job it was to assist persons in the church in becoming qualified voters and in enrolling in the NAACP. He said that he wanted all of his members to be voters and members of the NAACP. He also told how from his pulpit he had denounced the “Negro Inaugural Ball” as a venture to extend dying segregation to an area where it could draw new breath.5

The Atlanta-born, Morehouse-trained, Ph.D.-level minister was introduced by the Rev. W. P. Vaughn, host pastor. The Rev. J. L. Ware, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church, who also said he had expressed disapproval of Dr. Clay’s views during his services, introduced the Rev. Vaughn.

Music for the installation program was furnished by First Baptist Church of Ensley. The statement of occasion by Mrs. Osie Ware Mitchell, the appeal by Emory O. Jackson, solo by Miss Savannah Crews, and the installation of officers by the Rev. R. L. Alford, minister of the Sardis Baptist Church, rounded out the program.

W. C. Patton, retiring branch president who presided, offered a resolution which was unanimously adopted, rejecting the reported racial views of Dr. Clay as unrepresented and contrary to the position and sentiment of the recognized and authentic leadership of the Negro group. […]4


3. The inaugural committee for newly elected governor James Folsom planned a segregated inaugural ball for African Americans. See “God and Supreme Court Against P. S. Segregation, Says Jemison,” Alabama Tribune, 7 January 1955.

4. The remainder of the article, which lists those involved in the installation ceremony and those installed as officers, is omitted.

From William J. Cole

5 February 1955
Chicago, Ill.

A former member of Dexter, Cole donated a Communion table to the church in memory of his mother.